

CREATING A DATA SYSTEM TO HELP YOU END HOMELESSNESS

GOAL: Your community has a homelessness management information system that can be analyzed to assess how long people are homeless, what their needs are, what the causes of homelessness are, how people interact with mainstream systems of care, the effectiveness of interventions, and the number of homeless people.

Good data is essential for communities to plan to end homelessness, to evaluate programs, and to properly allocate resources. There are two typical methods of collecting data on homelessness, and both have their uses. The first is point-in-time data that is collected during a brief time period (typically a single night but sometimes as much as a week): It can identify the number of people who are homeless at any one time, as well as some of their characteristics. It is a good way to identify both people who live in shelters and people living on the streets.

The second source of information is administrative data, data that is continuously collected by programs. This data can be collated on a community-wide basis, and is then usually called a homelessness management information system – HMIS. An HMIS is an indispensable tool for communities seeking to end homelessness. It can be used to assess cost (would the cost of housing mentally ill homeless people, for example, be offset by the savings to treatment systems?); to plan solutions (how many supportive housing units would a community require to meet the needs of all chronically homeless people?); to implement prevention measures (how many people become homeless because of a utility shut-off? discharge from a prison? emancipation from foster care?); and to measure outcomes (what packages of services is most effective in reducing recidivism to homelessness?).

Most programs already collect data on their clients. Collating and analyzing administrative data is, however, a significant task. Three areas in which decisions must be made are:

- choosing and providing universal hardware and software
- reaching an agreement within the community (providers and governments) about how and what information will be shared
- setting up a mechanism for analyzing (not just collecting) the data

The federal government, which funds a significant percentage of homeless programs, has a strong interest in data. Congress has mandated an unduplicated count of homeless people at the community level. The most straightforward method of achieving such a count is through the creation of unique identifiers, usually anonymous. Such identifiers

are also extremely useful for data analysis, but care must be taken to protect the confidentiality of vulnerable groups such as victims of domestic violence, those with HIV/AIDS, etc.

Examples

Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) In 1991 Philadelphia initiated a data system to provide more specific data on shelter use and to improve program design. Data are used to allocate resources, to conduct performance based contracting (and thus to look at client outcomes), and to look at trends in numbers and demographic characteristics. Information is attached. A brief profile of this system is at:
www.endhomelessness.org/best/PhillyHMIS.htm

Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance The Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance has organized homeless programs statewide to collect information about where people were living immediately before they became homeless. This has been a powerful tool for planning and advocacy. A brief description is at:
www.endhomelessness.org/best/MHSAHMIS.htm

Wisconsin Wisconsin has a statewide HMIS system. Information on history, vision, software selection, agency participation, rollout, staffing, resources for users and lessons learned can be found at the following website (published by HUD):
<http://www.hud.gov:80/offices/cpd/homeless/hmis/models/wihmis.cfm>

Spokane (Washington) Spokane has a long-standing, citywide HMIS system. Information on developing the system, core features, unique features, and capabilities of the system can be found at the following website (published by HUD):
<http://www.huduser.org:80/periodicals/fieldworks/1202/fworks3.html>

Resources

- *Homelessness Management Information Strategies* (A list of the documents HUD has published on the issue) <http://www.hud.gov:80/offices/cpd/homeless/hmis/index.cfm>
- *HMIS Consumer Guide: A Review of Available HMIS Solutions* (Prepared under contract to HUD) <http://www.hud.gov:80/offices/cpd/homeless/hmis/guide/index.cfm>
- Dennis Culhane and Steven Metraux, "Where to from Here? A Policy Research Agenda Based on the Analysis of Administrative Data," Fannie Mae Foundation, 1997 (describing the uses of administrative data to illuminate the interaction of homeless people with other systems of care or custody for planning purposes).
http://www.knowledgeplex.org/kp/report/report/relfiles/homeless_1997_culhane5.pdf
- *Using HMIS for Effective Planning to End Homelessness*. (The proceedings of an audio-conference call sponsored by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the US Conference of Mayors, the National League of Cities, the National Council of State Housing Finance Agencies, and the Council of State Community Development

Agencies and featuring Dr. Dennis Culhane from the University of Pennsylvania and Julie Hovden from the Wisconsin Department of Administration, and Jennifer Schwartz of the National Council of State Housing Agencies).
<http://www.endhomelessness.org/best/summary010903.htm>

- Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System – Federally funded runaway and homeless youth providers are required to report data to the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Providers collect data on demographics of youth served, services provided, and youth's status upon exiting programs through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS). To view RHYMIS data collecting tools, go to: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/rhysb/forms.htm